NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1977

More Food for Conspiracy Buffs

By Stephanie de Pue

The shots that killed our 35th president, John F. Kennedy, in Dealey Plaza, Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, seem to exercise a continuing fascination for most Americans. New scenarios as to what really happened that brillant late fall afternoon are forever being heard on the late night talk shows, and not just those that cater to little old ladies in tennis shoes either. The most off-the-wall conspiracy theories are chewed over the most meat-and-potatoes dinner tables these days.

Now, with the release of *22 Fires* by Jerome Agel and Eugene Boe (Bantam, $1.95), an original paperback "novel" about "the accidental murder of an American president" those legions of assassination buffs are in for a fresh taste sensation. This book offers one of the wildest theories yet—that Lee Harvey Oswald actually aimed to kill Jacqueline Kennedy—and its authors have presented their case so well that even the hard news, front-of-the-book boys at Newsweek, normally no readers of novels, have taken note

Not that *22 Fires* is much of a novel, to dispose of that issue first. The president in question is Arthur J. Lancaster, his wife is Julie Montpensier Lancaster of the Maryland horse country His assassin is a former defector to Russia, John Henry Scott, who brought a comely Russian, Natalya, home as his wife. The murder takes place in a New York City ballpark in spring. The deterioration of both the Vietnam war and New York are somewhat further along than they actually were in 1963, and there are enough would-be assassins chasing the president to man an expansion ball club. So much for fiction.

Scott was born to lose on both sides of the Atlantic. His unlucky wife yearns for some American-style success and despises his sexual impotence. Lancaster loves being the nation's charismatic, popular young president: It gives him a chance to do good, and it makes the womanizing so easy. Julie is learning to like being the world's most famous woman, except when it interferes with her taking a cruise on the yacht of the world's most conspicuous rich man. So much for hyperobvious fact.

Beyond this *roman a clef* kernel, there's clearly been a great deal of research done. *22 Fires* (it's a Russian idiom describing volcanic, uncontrollable anger) is a fictional rendering of much suggestive information, some of it previously overlooked or suppressed from the Warren Commission's findings. For example, Marina Oswald told the commission she didn't know that her husband planned to kill the President, but she believed "he did not care whom he killed, as long as he killed someone and got his name in the paper." She says in the recently published *Marina and Lee* that he played the Russian opera "The Queen of Spades" over and over the eve of the assassination and that she had identified very strongly with the Queen. There are very strong parallels between the lives of the real Lee Harvey Oswald and the Count Hermann of the opera, and between the lives of Jackie Kennedy and the Queen of Spades; yet Marina might well have identified with her, too. All this material is used in *22 Fires*.

Several psychiatrists testified to the commission that they believed Oswald to be a psychotic whose anger was directed at women, his mother and his wife; and that his rifle was inevitably, psychologically speaking, directed at a woman. (This testimony was sealed.) A Russian acquaintance of Oswald's gave evidence that the only people he had ever heard him threaten to kill were his mother and his wife. Oswald's relationship with his wife was, in fact, a violent one.

Perhaps most suggestive is the question of how Oswald hit the President with a cheap rifle which consistently fired high and to the right when tested by the FBI. Agel and Boe point out that the First Lady was sitting on the President's left.

22 Fires is an intelligent, carefully constructed "psychological thriller," less exploitive and sensationalist than might be expected from its cover. Whatever the reason Agel and Boe, two well-known free-lancers, have chosen the fictional format to present their thesis, it's bound to give assassination buffs something new to chew on.